

Sunset, The Magazine of Western Living, May 1979

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YUKON AND DAWSON

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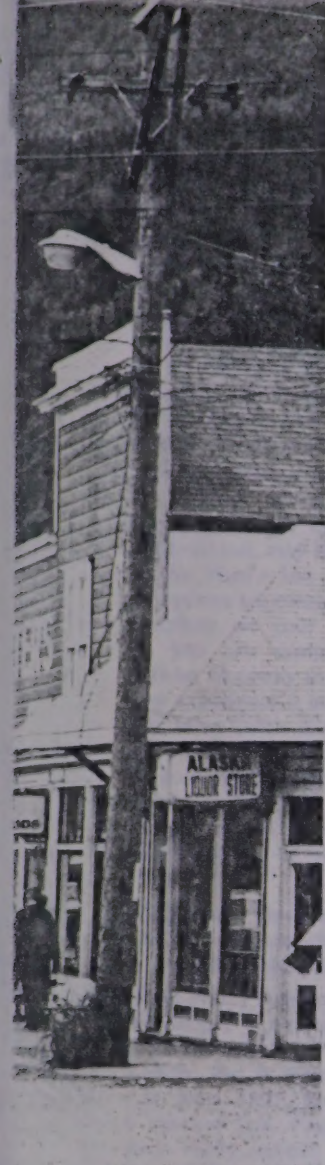
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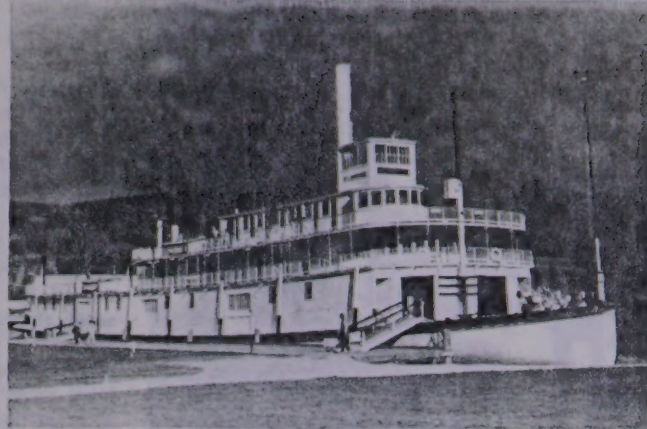
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GLENN CHRISTIANSEN

gravel road between Skagway and
cross dips into Yukon at Tagish Lake



Beached in Whitehorse
on bank of the Yukon,
stern-wheeler Klondike
is remnant of a fleet
that roamed the river
and its tributaries



Flags unfurled and banner held high, dwindling membership of the
Yukon Order of Pioneers gathers annually in Dawson for Discovery Days parade

Barely a lifetime has passed since the chaotic days of the Klondike Gold Rush—enough time for the gold to play out and to beach the proud fleet of Yukon riverboats, but not enough time to completely change the country's pioneer spirit. Grizzled sourdoughs still prowl the wilds of Alaska and Canada's Yukon Territory searching for good prospects with the faith of true believers.

Living museums of the West's last frontier, Skagway, Dawson, and smaller places in between along the gold rush "Trail of '98" have been insulated from the "outside" by their remoteness. Weathered boardwalks still edge gravel streets which, although traveled by cars instead of wagons, are still often hazy with dust. Once-elegant buildings, battered by long, harsh winters, now lean against each other for support, their floors creaking complaints against the

shifting permafrost beneath. But inside, shopkeepers still stock gold pans and supplies for a season's prospecting.

Still, changes have come to this corner of the north, especially in the last few years. Development of new lead, zinc, and copper mines and talk of a gas pipeline from Alaska through the Yukon have started a mini-boom in Whitehorse, the territorial capital, that is being felt throughout the region.

The big news this year, however, is the mid-May opening of the Skagway-Carcross section of the Klondike Highway. Travelers will now be able to drive the entire 440 miles from Skagway, Alaska, to Dawson, Yukon Territory, on a spectacular, two-lane, graded gravel road.

Another important development for travelers was creation of the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park in 1976. Centered in Skagway, the park includes

portions of the old Chilkoot and White Pass trails, and will have a visitor center in Seattle. A similar program by Parks Canada stimulated discussions that may lead to an international park stretching from Skagway to Dawson.

Since the real attractions of this region are these remnants of the gold rush, the journey to Dawson might not be for everyone. Unlike many old towns, these haven't yet been invaded by candle shops, boutiques, or antique emporiums, so shopping isn't extensive. Even local hiking and fishing isn't as inspiring as in other areas of the north.

But for true history buffs, these drawbacks become enticements. Summer, with pleasant days, chilly nights, and minimal rainfall, may be the best time to relive the West's last great gold rush. Travel options are considerable. Whether you explore on your own or with a group, you can sample the 440-mile route from Skagway to Dawson in four days, or experience it more intimately in a week. Most hotels and restaurants, although priced in the expensive tradition of the gold rush (independent travelers can easily spend \$150 a day for two adults), are modern and comfortable. However you go, advance reservations are a must.

Getting there: "Boys, help yourselves to the whole shooting match. I'm off for the Klondike."

With that, Harry Ash donated his Circle City roadhouse to a thirsty clientele and set off for the new diggings 220 miles up the Yukon. But it wasn't until a year later, in July, 1897, that word of the strike reached San Francisco and the stampede really started. By the end of summer, 1898, nearly 40,000 gold-hunters had made it to the Klondike.

Most had come on overloaded steamers from West Coast ports to Skagway, then traveled what is now called the "Trail of '98"—a heartbreaking portage over Chilkoot or White Pass, then a 550-mile float down the Yukon River.

This summer it will be considerably easier for Yukon-bound travelers to reach the Klondike gold fields, yet still quite an adventure. For many travelers the most convenient and dependable option will be a tour package. At least 13 companies are offering summer programs, ranging from overnight local excursions to three-week tours of Alaska and the Yukon that include a cruise up the Inside Passage to Skagway. Prices range from under \$100 to more than \$2,000 per person; your travel agent has itineraries and can make reservations.

Completion of the Skagway-Carcross link makes it more practical to take your own vehicle; to check road conditions, call (403) 667-5340.

Just getting your car north is a long haul:



GLENN CHRISTIANSEN

Abandoned in the gold fields, wooden housing of No. 4 Dredge could process 10,000 cubic yards of river bed a day, scooping gravel with buckets in foreground

either 1,700 miles (almost 1,000 of them on gravel roads) from Seattle up the Alaska Highway to Whitehorse, or a 2½-day ferry ride from Seattle to Skagway that costs \$377 for a small car.

With or without a car, you can still take the ferry. It goes up the spectacular Inside Passage and costs \$300 for two adults sharing a cabin with bath. Write to the Alaska Marine Highway, Pouch R, Juneau 99811, for reservations.

Scheduled air service from Seattle to Skagway costs about \$136 per person.

In Seattle, the Klondike Gold Rush Park visitor center at 117 S. Main Street in the Pioneer Square Historic District should have opened last year, but may be ready to open daily in June. Telephone (206) 442-7220 for an update.

Skagway: "The most outrageously lawless quarter I ever struck."

Globe-trotting Englishman Alexander MacDonald wrote this in 1897, when Soapy Smith and his gang ran Skagway.

Almost daily, hundreds of cheechak (newcomers) landed here with money supplies to complete their outfits.

For a flimflam man like Jefferson Smith these greenhorns were easy. Yet Soa became legend because he wasn't all bad. After cheating a man out of his earnings he'd often give him back enough to get home on. He set up a fund for stray dogs, formed a local militia, and in 1898 a few days before a town vigilante shot him, organized Skagway's biggest-ever Fourth of July celebration.

The town really came into its own in 1900, when the White Pass and Yukon finished laying 110 miles of track to Whitehorse. The train ran right down Broadway, edged by many of the same false-fronted buildings you see today.

Your first stop in town should be the Klondike Gold Rush Park visitor center, which will probably be in the Arct Brotherhood Hall on Broadway between Second and Third avenues (open daily 8 to 8 from June 1 to September 1).



Prospectors over Chilkoot Pass in the winter of '97
hauling a ton of gear each to the Yukon's headwaters



Gold from the bottom of their sluice box, partners
share reward of summer cleanup in the Klondike

and a film offer insight into the early adventurers faced. Plans include guided walking tours. Informal eateries, special tours or such as the Soapy Smith show (of '98 revue), and walks to the old graveyard is available.

to visit several surprisingly selling Indian and Eskimo is competitive with galleries in Anchorage.

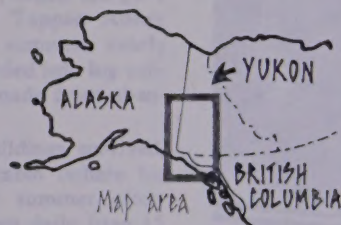
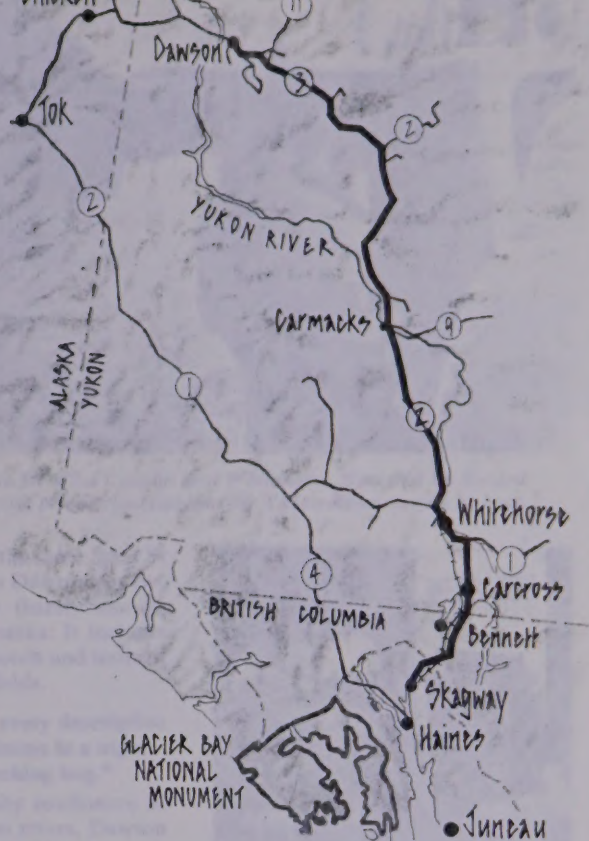
Chilkoot Trail: "Temperature in 15 below to 10 above zero. have traveled 270 miles to outfit over 35 miles of trail."

On March 19, 1898, diary entry by Starr, a 20-year-old University of California graduate who, with partners, still had many more difficulties to get nearly three tons of gear over the head of the Yukon River. Mounties required each man to have a year's supply of food as they were crossing the moun-

tains on the White Pass Trail (the railroad pushed through here a year later), but most stampedeers crossed on the equally heartbreaking Chilkoot Pass Trail a few miles to the north.

Today both trails form the third section of Gold Rush Park, and modern adventurers outfitted with backpacks can trace the Chilkoot Trail 35 miles from the old townsite of Dyea to the railroad station at Bennett. Write to Park Superintendent, Box 517, Skagway, Alaska 99840 for hiking information.

Rental cars in Skagway and Whitehorse can be taken on the new Klondike Highway link over White Pass, but there is a drop-off charge ranging from \$50 to \$100 on one-way trips. Daily rates are about \$20 per day and 20 cents per mile.



Just-completed highway link connecting Skagway and Carcross now permits auto loop trips via Whitehorse or Dawson back to Haines with ferry connection to Skagway

The way it was: the painful climb up, the gold pans, and later, bucket dredges

Mar Air (Box 422, Haines, Alaska 99827) has approval to operate bus service from Skagway to Whitehorse, but schedules weren't set at our deadline.

The narrow-gauge White Pass and Yukon Route (Box 2147, Seattle 98111) still offers daily service between Skagway and Whitehorse for \$35, including a hefty lunch in Bennett. The trip takes at least 6½ hours, gets you into either town between 5 and 6 p.m.

On the way to Whitehorse:

"We took a header through a tremendous comber and shot into the whirlpool of the great circular court."

Jack London's description of navigating the *Yukon Belle* through Miles Canyon and Whitehorse Rapids in the autumn

897 is a gold rush classic. After the ships of crossing Chilkoot Pass, adventurers in all manner of impromptu next braved these rapids—the last obstacle before the Klondike. Surprisingly, most made it.

For their baptism, drenched boaters ended up at a camp named for the rapids. In 1900, Whitehorse had become a crossroads: starting point for a fleet of stern-wheeled riverboats plying the Yukon, and terminus of the new railroad. The construction of the Alaska Highway during World War II signaled the end of river steamers. One legacy of this is the S.S. *Klondike*, a restored stern-wheeler beached at the foot of Second Avenue in Whitehorse. It's open in summer from 9 to 6; free guided tours take about an hour.

One of the city's oldest buildings (1901) is the log church on the corner of Elliott Third, but the most striking is the one on government complex on Second Avenue. Completed in 1976, its anodized aluminum exterior contrasts with a warm interior displaying contemporary art.

A visitor information office at 302 Second Street, open daily from 8 to 8 during the summer, has details on hikes, tours, and special events.

The Klondike Highway: "You look hard to rain; it helps settle the dust." A traveler who told us this last August had just driven the 330 miles from Whitehorse to Dawson. This summer the road is being treated with calcium chloride, which should be a great improvement, but still isn't pavement. If the dust doesn't discourage driving, consider the cost of gas which may hit \$1.25 (U.S.) per gallon.

There are good alternatives. Northward-bound buses offer Whitehorse-Dawson service six mornings a week. One-way fares plan fares are \$103.50 for the adult, half price for others; cheaper excursion fares may be available.

The Coaches (2157 Second Ave., Whitehorse) has regular bus service to Dawson on Monday, Thursday, Saturday, with return trips south on Friday, Friday, and Sunday. Taking 7 hours, the one-way trip costs \$40; a round trip costs \$72.

Another may be your best alternative. A package we found offered a two-one-night excursion to Dawson, including round-trip charter airfare from Whitehorse, hotel, and tours of the town and Klondike gold fields for \$250 per person, double occupancy. Another



Treacherous rapids used to fill Miles Canyon near Whitehorse. Now that it's flooded and tamed by a hydroelectric project, you can tour the Yukon River canyon by boat

package, costing about the same, goes by bus from Whitehorse to Dawson for two nights and a full day (barely enough time), then on to Fairbanks. It includes all transportation and hotels and tours of Dawson and the gold fields.

Dawson: "Buildings of every description sprang up like mushrooms in a night from the black, reeking bog."

Laid out near the marshy confluence of the Klondike and Yukon rivers, Dawson was booming by 1897, when *Harper's Weekly* correspondent Tappan Adney arrived. By the next summer, nearly 30,000 souls were crowded into log cabins, tents, and shacks made from abandoned river boats.

Few of these early buildings survived, but Robert Service's cabin (where his "ghost" recites poetry summer afternoons at 4) did. It's open daily June 15 to September 3, from 9 to 6.

Most of the historic buildings now standing date from 1899 on, when the gold was pouring out of the diggings and it seemed Dawson might actually become the "San Francisco of the north."

Your first stop should be the information center on Fifth Avenue between Princess and Queen streets (daily mid-May to mid-September, 9 to 9). Along with maps, a list of restaurants and services, and local hiking and fishing tips, pick up a schedule for Dawson's biggest event of the year—Discovery Days, August 17 to 20. The center can also help arrange an excursion out to the gold fields.

Best way to explore Dawson is on foot in the morning, when quiet streets and low light toy with the imagination.

The restored Palace Grand Theatre on King Street presents the Gaslight Follies



Backpackers bound for Chilkoot Trail check park office in Skagway for messages

at 8 nightly except Mondays from June 1 to September 15. Seats cost \$5. Across the street you can walk through the old 1900 post office.

Diamond Tooth Gertie's at Fourth and Queen, Canada's only legalized gambling hall, is open daily except Sundays and Tuesdays from 8 P.M. to 2 A.M. June 2 to September 15; \$2 entry.

Near the foot of Queen Street on Fifth Avenue is the S.S. *Keno*, another restored stern-wheeler (open June 1 to September 16, 9:30 to 6), and next door the Bank of Commerce where Robert Service worked. There's a small gold museum upstairs.

At Third and Princess, the old Harrington Building houses an excellent photographic display of old Dawson and the diggings (open daily June 1 to September 16, 10 to 6). Two blocks farther south on Fifth Avenue is the Dawson City Museum (open daily May 27 to September

Dawson is characters, Gaslight Follies, Robert Service's ghost, no "outside" prices



I'm for real! During intermission at Dawson's Palace Grand al minister invites patrons to attend his Sunday services



Prices seem to increase with the latitude. Canadian dollar is worth about 85 U.S. cents

GLENN CHRISTIANSEN



Festooned with feathers, this Dawson belle rekindles the Klondike spirit

6. \$1). which has a sizable of gold rush memorabilia.

e diggings: "It looked well—but it was freezing."

ng worked along Bonanza r Dawson during the first winters suggested another entrepreneur Tex Rickard. he ground glowed red from ng the permafrost; miners, n freezing muck, emptied pay dirt into gray piles to be gold after the rivers thawed. l strike was about 10 miles f Dawson. Local tour com- daily excursions there for er person. Winding through vel tailings, you first stop at monsters that made them; ge, the largest wooden-hulled, dredge in North America, low the original discovery by Skookum Jim's partner,

George Carmack. Marked by a simple plaque, the claim produced the first placer (loose gold) in a region that would yield \$500 million worth.

Before you head out: "But the first and all-important question is, when to start for the Klondike..."

In May, 1898, the very first issue of a new magazine called *Sunset* offered some common-sense advice to Klondike-bound travelers: "There is always great inquiry for space, and it will be wisdom on the part of all contemplating the trip to make early reservations."

This advice is equally applicable 81 years later, and the best source of information on tours, transportation, and accommodations is your travel agent. There are also several good books to help you plan your trip.

Sunset's recently revised *Travel Guide to Alaska* (Lane Publishing Co., Menlo Park, Calif. 94025, 1978; \$3.95) doesn't

include the Yukon, but it will aid in planning Alaska portions of your trip.

The Milepost (Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., Box 4-EEE, Anchorage 99509, 1979; \$5.95) is a thorough 498-page guide to the Yukon and Alaska. Two other useful books from the same publisher are *The Gold Hustlers*, by Lewis Green (1977; \$7.95), and *Chilkoot Pass*, by Archie Satterfield (1978; \$4.95).

You can write for these two excellent free publications: *The Worlds of Alaska*, from the Alaska State Division of Tourism, Pouch E, Juneau 99811; and *Hospitality Yukon*, from Tourism Yukon, Box 2703, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada.

The Last Grand Adventure, by William Bronson (McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York, N.Y., 1977; \$24.95) gives a wonderful overview of the entire Klondike saga. Its historic photographs and eyewitness accounts offer rare insight into the West's last great gold rush. □

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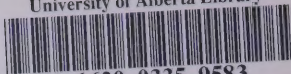
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